

Message Text

SECRET

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ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 /026 W
-----047100 250914Z /10

R 250706Z APR 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7746
INFO USMISSION USUN NEW YORK
CIA WASHDC

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 2307

EXDIS/NOFORN

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1,2,4 DATE IMPOSSIBLE TO DETERMINE
TAGS: PINR, PINT, SY
SUBJ: HAMMOUD AL-CHOUI, SYRIAN AMBASSADOR-DESIGNATE TO UN

1. HAMMOUD AL-CHOUI (PPREFERRED LATIN SPELLING), DIRECTOR OF AMERICA DIVISION OF MFA SINCE MARCH 1973, HAS BEEN NAMED BY PRESIDENT AL-ASSAD AS SYRIA'S AMBASSADOR TO THE UN TAKING THE PLACE OF AMBASSADOR ALLAF. CHOUFI EXPECTS TO TAKE UP HIS POST AROUND MID-MAY.

2. CHOUFI CLAIMS TO BE PUZZLED BY HIS ASSIGNMENT BECAUSE PRESIDENT KNOWS HE CANNOT AND WILL NOT ENGAGE IN THE PYRO-TECHNICS ALLAF INDULGED IN (OFTEN APPARENTLY WITHOUT SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS FROM DAMASCUS). CHOUFI BELIEVES THAT PRESIDENT MAY WANT TO PROJECT A NEW LOOK AT UN. WE ARE UNSURE WHETHER THIS IS THE CORRECT ASSESSMENT OF ASSAD'S INTENTIONS OR WHETHER THE PRESIDENT IS SIMPLY CONTINUING TO PAY OFF AN OLD DEBT TO CHOUFI INCURRED IN THE PERIOD 1963-65 WHEN CHOUFI SUPPORTED ASSAD IN AN EARLY CONFRONTATION WITH SALAH JADID AND OTHERS IN BAATH PARTY LEADERSHIP CIRCLES.

3. WHATEVER THE REASON(S) BEHIND CHOUFI'S SELECTION, WE HAVE STRESSED IN ALL OUR CONTACTS WITH MFA ON UN AFFAIRS OUR
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DESIRE FOR NON-CONFRONTATIONAL FRANK DISCUSSION OF ISSUES AND COOPERATION WHERE INTERESTS MERGE. WE THINK ASSAD IS LOOKING TO UN AS ONE OF SEVERAL FORA WHERE SYRIA CAN WORK TO ISOLATE ISRAEL INTERNATIONALLY AND SWAY WORLD AND PARTICULARLY US PUBLIC OPINION TO SUPPORT ARAB CAUSE. ASSAD APPEARS CONVINCED SADAT INITIATIVE IS DEAD LETTER AND HE MAY WANT TO BE IN POSITION TO CAPITALIZE ON PUBLIC RELATIONS ASPECT OF

ISRAELI "INTRANSIGENCE" WHICH LED TO FAILURE OF SADAT'S TRIP TO JERUSALEM. UN IS TRADITIONAL SYRIAN ALTERNATIVE WHEN OTHER NEGOTIATING CHANNELS SEEM BLOCKED AND WE WOULD NOT BE SURPRISED TO SEE SYRIAN OFFENSIVE IN SECURITY COUNCIL NEXT FALL IN ABSENCE OF PROGRESS ON NEGOTIATIONS THROUGH OTHER CHANNELS.

4. CHOUFI IS A GOOD CANDIDATE TO PROJECT IMAGE OF SYRIA AS RESPONSIBLE ARAB COUNTRY SEEKING PEACE, BUT BLOCKED BY ISRAEL'S "EXPANSIONIST" PHILOSOPHY. HE IS SOFT-SPOKEN INDIVIDUAL, WHO PREFERS INTELLECTUAL ARGUMENTS TO ARAB POLEMICS. IN MFA HE WAS STUCK STRICTLY TO ASSAD'S FOREIGN POLICY LINE IN DEALINGS WITH LATIN AMERICANS, WHILE HE HAS TAILORED HIS APPROACH TO US TO APPEAR REASONABLE AND WILLING TO QUESTION HIS OWN GOVERNMENT'S POLICIES. EVEN WITH US, HOWEVER, HE USUALLY DOES NOT STRAY FAR FROM SYRIA'S POSITION ON FOREIGN POLICY ALTHOUGH HE SELDOM PROJECTS THE HARD LINE OF FOUAD KHADDAM. HE HAS NOT BEEN SO CIRCUMSPECT WHEN DEALING WITH INTERNAL SYRIAN MATTERS.

5. CHOUFI HAS CRITICIZED THE ASSAD REGIME SEVERELY FOR ITS AUTHORITARIAN CHARACTER AND LACK OF A BROAD BASE. HE HAS TRIED TO DRAW EMBOFFS INTO JOINING IN HIS CRITICISM AND AT ONE POINT LAST SUMMER (1977) SEEMED TO BE PROBING FOR OUR SUPPORT OF AN (UNIDENTIFIED) DISAFFECTED GROUP WHICH OPPOSED THE REGIME. HE CLAIMED THAT ASSAD IS STRENGTHENED BY US
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SUPPORT AND THAT WE SHOULD USE OUR INFLUENCE TO GET ASSAD TO CHANGE HIS INTERNAL POLICIES. HE SEES THIS INFLUENCE AS BEING EXERCISED DIRECTLY WITH ASSAD THROUGH HIGH-LEVEL US SPOKESMEN. HE HAS MADE NO SECRET OF HIS PRESUMED DISAFFECTION, SPEAKING OPENLY TO US VISITORS AND OTHERS, EVEN IN THE PRESENCE OF OTHER SYRIAN OFFICIALS. WE BELIEVED THAT PRESIDENT ASSAD IS AWARE OF VIEWS CHOUFI EXPRESSES AND MUST ASSUME PRESIDENT APPROVES OF HIS APPROACH. CHOUFI CLAIMS A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PRESIDENT WHICH ALLOWS HIM THIS UNUSUAL FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION. IT IS CONCEIVABLY THAT CHOUFI HAS BEEN TRYING TO PROBE NATURE OF US VIEW TOWARD PRESIDENT AL-ASSAD ON BEHALF OF PRESIDENT. (ASSAD HAS BEEN KNOWN TO USE AGENT PROVOCATEURS IN MILITARY TO SMOKE OUT DISAFFECTION AND WE SEE NO REASON WHY HE WOULD NOT TRY OUT SAME APPROACH ON USG.)

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ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 /026 W
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R 250706Z APR 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
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INFO USMISSION USUN NEW YORK
CIA WASHDC

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EXDIS/NOFORN

6. WE HAVE STONWALLED CHOUFI ON CRITICISM OF ASSAD AND HAVE CONTINUALLY POINTED OUT WHY IT IS US POLICY TO AVOID ANY ACTIONS WHICH COULD BE INTERPRETED AS AIMED AT UNDERMINING THE GOVERNMENT WHICH WE RECOGNIZE. ASSUMING THIS MESSAGE HAS GOTTEN BACK TO PRESIDENT, IT MAY BY ONE REASON HE CONTINUED INTERESTED IN EXPANDING OUR BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP. WE ASSUME CHOUFI WILL PROBE USUN OFFICERS AT ALL LEVELS ALONG SAME LINES AND WE SUGGEST CAUTION IN DEALING WITH HIM ON SYRIAN INTERNAL QUESTIONS. WE DO NOT BELIEVE HE IS A TARGET FOR ANY FORM OF EXPLOITATION REGARDLESS OF HIS APPARENT READINESS TO DEAL WITH MOST SENSITIVE SUBJECTS. HE HAS PROVIDED SOME GOOD INFORMATION IN PAST, BUT WE HAVE HAD REASON TO QUESTION HIS ACCRUACY ON OCCASION. WE HAVE CONCLUDED THAT THE RISKS OF APPEARING SYMPATHETIC TO DRAW HIM OUT ARE GREATER THAN THE VALUE OF THE INFORMATION HE PROVIDES.

7. CHOUFI, A DRUZE, WAS BORN IN 1936 TO A POOR BUT PROUD FAMILY FORM SALKHAD, IN THE SUWAYDA REGION OF SYRIA. HIS FAMILY WAS KNOWN FOR POLITICAL AND REVOLUTIONARY ACTIVITY SINCE THE TIME OF THE FRENCH MANDATE. AT THE AGE OF 16, IN 1952, HE JOINED THE BAATH PARTY. HE WAS JAILED FOR BAATH ACTIVITIES FROM 1953 TO 1954 WHERE HE BECAME A SKILLED POKER AND CHESS PLAYER. ON HIS RELEASE HE SAYS HE OFFERED TO MANAGE THE 1954 ELECTION IN SWAYDA FOR BAATH PARTH
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CANDIDATES. CHOUFI CHOSE HIS BAATHI CANDIDATES FOR THEIR INFLUENCE RETHER THAN THEIR CAPABILITY AND ENGINEERED A VICTORY FOR ALL FOUR BAATH CANDIDATES. CHOUFI ATTENDED DAMASCUS UNIVERSITY WHERE HE MAJORED IN ARAB LITERATURE AND WAS BRIEFLY A SCHOOL TEACHER. HE IDENTIFIED HIMSELF WITH YOUNG MILITANT BAATHIS UNDER ALI SALIH SA-ID, AN IRAQI. IN

THE EARLY 1960'S CHOUFI EDITED THE PARTY NEWSPAPER AL-BAATH. AT THE SEPTEMBER 1963 NATIONAL CONGRESS OF THE BAATH PARTY, CHOUFI WAS ELECTED TO THE NATIONAL COMMAND AND IN NOVEMBER WAS MADE SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE REGIONAL COMMAND. BY HIS OWN ACCOUNT HE TRIED TO PLY ONE GROUP OFF AGAINST ANOTHER WITHIN THE PARTY WITHOUT MUCH CONCERN FOR IDEOLOGY TO IMPROVE HIS OWN POSITION. HE MADE AN ALLIANCE WITH HAFEZ AL-ASSAD TO TRY TO UNDERCUT THE AFLAQ WING OF THE PARTY. HOWEVER, SALAH JADID ALLIED HIMSELF AND THE MILITARY WING OF THE PARTY, OVER ASSAD'S OBJECTION, AGAINST CHOUFI AND HE WAS EXPELLED FORM THE PARTY. HE SAYS TODAY THE MAIN REASON FOR HIS DISMISSAL WAS HIS OPPOSITION TO THE DOMINANCE OF THE MILITARY IN THE BAATHI LEADERSHIP. AFTER FUTILE ATTEMPTST TO SET UP AN ALTERNATIVE BAATH PARTY AND THEN TO REGAIN HIS POSITION, CHOUFI WAS OFFERED THE CHOICE BETWEEN JAIL AND AN AMBASSADORSHIP. HE ACCEPTED IN NOVEMBER 1965 THE POST OF AMBASSADOR TO INDONESIA WHERE HE SERVED FROM 1966-70. HE WAS THEN ASSIGNED TO INDIA FORM 1970-72. WHEN HE RETURNED TO DAMASCUS IN 1972, HE WAS MADE DIREKTOR OF AMERICAN AFFAIRS AT THE FOREIGN MINISTRY WHICH WAS AT THAT TIME A NEW JOB. ENEB AFTER THE REESTABLISHMENT OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS IN 1974 WITH THE UNITED STATES, CHOUFI EXHIBITED LITTLE INTEREST IN THE SUBSTANCE OF HIS JOB. HOWEVER, HE HAS ALWAYS BEEN ACCESSIBLE TO US AND ON OCCASION EXTREMELY HELPFUL IN SHARING HIS INSIGHTS INOT BAATH PARTY AND SYRIAN SECURITY MANEUVERINGS.

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8. ALTHOUGH HE ONCE PLAYED A ROLE IN SALAH BITAR'S OUSTER FORM THE PARTY, CHOUFI CLAIMS NOW TO BE A PROTEGE OF BITAR, ONE OF THE FOUNDERS OF THE BAATH PARTY WHOSE IDEAS CHOUFI CLAIMS HAVE DEEP ROOTS IN SYRIA. HE ALSO CLAIMS ASSOCIATION WITH REGIONAL COMMAND MEMBERS GENERAL ABD AL-GHANI IBGAHIM AND NABIH HASSUN BOTH OF HOM. ACCORDING TO CHOUFI, SUPPORT THE CONCEPT OF A DEMOCRATIC PARTY BUILT ON A BROAD BASE. HOWEVER, CHOUFI'S PRIMARY CLAIM TO STRENGTH IS HIS LONG-STANDING RELATIONSHIP WITH PRESIDENT AL-ASSAD.

9. CHOUFI IS A PRESONABLE INDIVIDUAL WHO SMOKES MARLBORO'S CONTINUOUSLY AND LIKES SCOTCH AND WATER. UNLIKE, SOME OF HIS COLLEAGUES AT THE MFA HE IS NOT RANK CONSCIOUS. HE ENJOYS WIDE RANGING AND FREE DISCUSSIONS OF FOREIGN POLICY. CHOUFI IS EFFECTIVE IN SPEAKING TO SMALL GROUPS AND IN PRIVATE DEALINGS. HE HAS NO PATIENCE FOR BOMBLAST OR IGNORANCE. AND CONSIDERS HIMSELF AN INTELLECTUAL. WE HAVE NOT HEARD HIM ADDRESS LARGE AUDIENCES, BUT ASSUME THIS WILL BE NO PROBLEM FOR HIM BIVEN HIS EARLY CAREER IN BAATH PARTY POLITICS. WHEN WE SUGGESTED TO HIM THAT UN MIGHT KEEP HIM BUSIER THAN MFA IN DAMASCUS, HE REPLIED THAT HIS STYLE WAS TO DELEGATE SO

HE DID NOT EXPECT TO BE TOO PRESSURED.

10 CHOUFI IS MARRIED WITH A SON AND A DAUGHTER. HIS SON, AL-ARABI, IS JUST FINISHING HIS BACCALAUREATE THIS YEAR AND WOULD LIKE TO STUDY AT A NEW YORK UNIVERSITY. CHOUFI'S WIFE, A PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHER, SELDOM APPEARS IN PUBLIC WITH HER HUSBAND AND UNLIKE CHOUFI DOES NOT SPEAK FLUENT ENGLISH.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: AMBASSADOR DESIGNATE, BIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION, INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENTS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 25 apr 1978
Decaption Date: 20 Mar 2014
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978DAMASC02307
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: DC ALSO X 1 2
Executive Order: X4
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780176-0051
Format: TEL
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions:
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780421/aaaaarhz.tel
Line Count: 233
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: d21349a8-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION SS
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: NOFORN, EXDIS
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 5
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: NOFORN, EXDIS
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 25 feb 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 2863055
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: HAMMOUD AL-CHOUFI, SYRIAN AMBASSADOR-DESIGNATE TO UN
TAGS: PINR, PINT, SY, UN, (AL-CHOUFI, HAMMOUD)
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/d21349a8-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014